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The Pragmatics Of Politeness As Expressed By Native Arabic-Speaking English Learners

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THE PRAGMATICS OF POLITENESS

AS EXPRESSED BY ADULT, NATIVE ARABIC-SPEAKING ENGLISH LEARNERS

By

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To my dear wife, Rhonda Johnson Marn,
who instinctively knew that adult, ESL education was the answer
when I wondered aloud about finding something fulfilling for the third act of my life.

"I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious."
-Albert Einstein

"Find the good—and praise it."
-Alex Haley

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As I came nearer and nearer to the completion of my coursework in the Master of Arts in English as a Second Language (MAESL) program at Hamline University, the question that loomed large was, "Where will I be teaching?" I knew that I wanted to teach adult English learners (ELs) in an institution of higher learning abroad, but I was uncertain of where my first assignment would take me. As I explored the overseas job market for instructors of English as a foreign language (EFL), it was clear that there is a significant need for native English-speaking language instructors at all levels in the Middle East. The need is especially great for male teachers, as in many parts of the Middle East education is segregated by gender. Necessity sharpened my focus, and I set my sights on the native Arabic-speaking world. My need is to study something relevant to my prospective assignment overseas, and so I began to think about issues of importance to this group of ELs for my capstone topic.

For the past three years, I have been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adult English learners (ELs) from around the world in an Intensive English Program (IEP) at a private university located in a major metropolitan area of the American Upper Midwest. A significant portion of the students at my school are native Arabic speakers who come from countries in the Middle East. Just as Arab countries vary from each other geographically, there is rich diversity across the region in the contexts of Arab culture and the Arabic language. Within the Arab world one can speak of Egyptian

culture, Jordanian culture, Saudi culture, Syrian culture, etc. Similarly, the Arabic language can be sub-divided with references to Egyptian Arabic, Jordanian Arabic, Saudi Arabic, Syrian Arabic, etc. Each culture and language within the Arab and Arabic rubrics have features which are uniquely their own. The studies cited in this paper reflect the diversity within the Arab world. Among the references made are those to Jordanian Arabic and Syrian Arabic compliment responses, Egyptian Arabic refusals, and Saudi culture, among others. The diversity within the Arab world is by no means limited to the four aforementioned nationalities.

Many Americans from the United States (U.S. Americans) prominently associate fear with the Middle East and its people. This became clear to me as I began to make known my prospective post-graduate school plans. "You are so brave," my friends, family, and classmates marveled. Fear and the unknown often go hand in hand, and I believe it is reasonable to speculate that the unknown and misunderstanding factor considerably in the fear associated with the Middle East and its people by many U. S. Americans. It is a common misunderstanding that all Arabs reside in the Middle East, and that all countries in the Middle East are Arab. Misunderstanding is often mutual, so I began to review literature regarding intercultural communication and relations between the native Arabic-speaking and the native English-speaking worlds. What I found is that the potential for misunderstanding between these two language groups is great, and it gets even greater when one factors the discrepancies between the way native speakers and non-native speakers use any given language. Language learners often lack proficiency, both linguistically and pragmatically, in the target language. Cultural differences coupled with the linguistic and pragmatic shortcomings common to many second language

learners provide fertile ground for misunderstanding in communication between native English speakers and native Arabic-speaking English learners.

A twenty-one year old acquaintance of mine, heretofore known as FMA, described one such incident. FMA, who holds dual American and Saudi citizenship, has immediate family in both countries, the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Having spent the first eighteen years of his life in Saudi Arabia, FMA is a native Arabic speaker. Culturally, he describes himself as a Saudi Sunni Muslim. FMA was eighteen years old when he first met his American family. He describes his initial meetings with the girlfriend of his American brother as awkward and embarrassing. In Saudi culture, men look upon and interact only with women in their immediate family—their mothers and sisters, their grandmothers and aunts. Female first cousins are not a part of this inner circle, nor are the female friends of the family. It was customary and polite for FMA to look down in the presence of girls and women who were not a part of his immediate family. Therefore, he would politely cast his eyes downward and speak very little in the presence of his American brother's girlfriend. The girlfriend interpreted FMA's expressions as a sign that he did not like her. He thinks that I am not good enough for his brother nor his family, she thought, because he won't even look at me. FMA, she thought, was arrogant and aloof.

Given my position at the language school, the many students I have taught from the Middle East, the experiences I have witnessed, and the experiences students from this group of English learners have shared with me, the question that kept coming to my mind was this: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? This is the question I explore

in this capstone project. The literature review in the following chapter points out how cultural differences supported by research-based theoretical frameworks help us understand one another culturally.

As I thought of the contributions that I could make in my role as an English language instructor to facilitate understanding between native English speakers and native Arabic-speaking ELs, it became clear that effective communication would be a key component of any contribution, and pragmatics would figure significantly in this intercultural discourse. Chomsky (1965) cited the domain of pragmatics as "performance," i.e., the way the individual goes about using language. Katz expanded on this viewpoint with an explanation of pragmatics as theories that explain the reasoning of speakers and hearers. Levinson (1983) made the connection between language use and context in the study of pragmatics, but he suggested that it be limited to the use of language operating under the direction of grammatical rules. Mey (2001) argued that restricting pragmatics to purely linguistic matters is not an acceptable point of view, particularly for those who want to include the whole of human language use. A truly pragmatic consideration, he maintained, deals with users in their social context and does not limit itself to only grammar-related aspects of those contexts. Mey further maintained that communication in society happens primarily by means of language, and language users as social beings communicate and use language on society's premises. Therefore, society controls access to communication. Pragmatics as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, he stated, bases itself on a study of those premises and determines how they affect human language use. Mey (2001) arrived at a definition of pragmatics that will guide my study: Pragmatics studies the use of language

in human communication as determined by the conditions of society, i.e., pragmatics is the study of the ways in which language is used in social context.

As the cultures and people of the Arabic-speaking and the English-speaking worlds come increasingly into contact, I can help ensure that individuals from the two groups get off to the right start, perhaps even maintain a certain level of civility or friendliness, in the course of conversation. Upon first meeting or initial contact, individuals commonly begin by engaging in speech acts. These speech acts, defined by Searle (1969) as a minimal unit of discourse and by Cohen (1996) as a basic and functional unit of communication, include making introductions, giving and responding to compliments, asking questions, apologizing, leave taking, and giving refusals. To understand these speech acts, one must also understand the pragmatic features that speakers of a language employ to achieve their communicative goals (Hinkel, 1996). Therefore, this study examines the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by native Arabic-speaking English learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) environments and situations, and seeks to answer the question: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? This chapter introduces issues of importance associated with this topic.

Pragmatics, Politeness, and Native Arabic-Speaking ELs

Few studies have been conducted relative to pragmatics and native Arabic speakers who are English learners. Research on these learners has tended to focus on cultural issues, rather than pragmatic issues. A study by Glowacki-Dudka, Usman, and Treff (2008) examined the breakdown of professional and personal communication

between native English-speaking Americans and native Arabic-speaking Saudis (operating in English and Arabic) through the lens of cultural differences. Similarly, detailed studies are needed to examine pragmatic differences in speech acts between native English-speakers and native Arabic-speaking ELs operating in English. For this reason, this project will examine the difficulties with the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs studying at a university in the American Midwest. I want to determine areas of pragmatic difficulty for this group of ELs, and match the findings of my case study with effective teaching strategies. The purpose of this study is to provide information to English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) instructors and learners that will better prepare these ELs on the pragmatics of politeness as expressed in English. The information will assist the ELs in the aim of lessening occasions of pragmatic error and improving these learners' English language usage.

Background and Role of the Researcher

My undergraduate studies at the University of Minnesota prepared me well for this study. In essence, I studied comparative cultures and languages extensively. I completed Bachelor of Arts degrees in American Studies and African American Studies. I also completed a minor in German, and I studied French. The American Studies and African American Studies degrees were elaborate explorations and comparisons of two parallel cultures within one nation. The comparative culture requirements for the degrees broadened the scope of my educational surveying to cultures beyond North America to those in Africa, Europe, and Asia. Foreign language studies in German and French accomplished this as well. I developed a passion for foreign language film, and I traveled

abroad as an informal practicum to my education and its related interests. A study that involves an exploration and comparison of two cultures, two populations, and their English language usage seems like a natural extension of this education.

During the course of (and for several years after the completion of) my undergraduate studies, my employment as a clerical civil servant in the Neurology Department of the University of Minnesota Hospital resembled another educational practicum in international cultures and relations. The residents and fellows who studied and worked in the department came from all over the world. My employment provided an unexpected premium, a de facto internship as a tutor in English as a Second Language (ESL). I became the go-to person for assistance with English among the department's foreign residents and fellows. It was during this experience that I first entertained thoughts of graduate study in EFL/ESL. When I made the decision to enroll in graduate school, one of the department's fellows from Brazil, whom I had assisted over the years, and who went on to establish epilepsy clinics in his home country, wrote one of my letters of recommendation for admittance to Hamline University's EFL/ESL program. In the letter, he stated that this study is a natural and perfect fit for me, based on his experiences working with me in an educational capacity and setting. Since my enrollment at Hamline, I have been volunteering as an English language instructor to adult ESL students from all over the world at the Northeast Center of the Minnesota Literacy Council. For the past three years, I have worked as an instructor of an Intensive English Program (IEP) for a language school at a university in the American Upper Midwest. My students hail from all over the world, and over a hundred of them have been native Arabic speakers from countries in the Middle East.

Before I conclude my research on adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs, I will have observed the English language usage of students from this group for hundreds of hours in an educational setting, both inside of the classroom and outside the classroom on breaks, between classes, at lunch, and during social activities arranged by the language school. All of these students have studied English in their home country at the primary and secondary levels for several years. Most will have lived in the United States for one to two years or less. My role in conducting research for this project will be multi-tiered. I will read about, observe, and make inquiries of adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs on the pragmatics of politeness, in addition to instructing and testing them on the regular curriculum assigned by the school. It is my hope that the experiences that I document (among the students and between the students and me) will expose areas of pragmatic difficulty for this group of ELs and lead to effective teaching strategies that will improve their English language usage.

The study of pragmatics involves a significant amount of nuance in language. Determining the essence of subtle differences will take time. I anticipate completing my capstone project by the end of spring semester 2017. This will allow time to observe and detect nuances in the English language usage of my students, and it will allow for the time it likely will take to determine, explore, and validate outcomes, trends, and strategies.

Summary and Overview of Chapters

My research is aimed at answering the following question: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings?

This chapter sets the stage for the discussion and exploration of the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by native Arabic-speaking ELs. A definition of *pragmatics* is presented in detail via the thoughts of experts in the field of linguistics. Explanations of the importance and the need for this study are given, as well as important reasons for native Arabic-speaking ELs to demonstrate pragmatic competence in English. Few studies have been conducted regarding the pragmatic competence of this group of ELs. As the Arabic-speaking and the English-speaking worlds come into closer and more frequent contact, pragmatic competence on the part of Arabic speakers in English when expressing politeness becomes key to a successful start in communications between representatives of the two language groups. Next, the background, role, and biases of the researcher are detailed in this chapter. Finally, the guiding questions of this study are listed.

In Chapter One, I introduced my research by establishing the purpose, the significance, and the need for this project. The context of this project was briefly introduced, as was the background, role, and assumptions of the researcher. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature relevant to the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by native Arabic-speaking English learners. In Chapter Three, I describe how I want to design my curriculum project, and in Chapter Four, I reflect on my experience writing this capstone project. I will give conclusions, discuss limitations, present implications for

further projects, and give recommendations for strategies that could improve the pragmatic competence of a particular group of native Arabic-speaking English learners.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The purpose of this project is to answer the question: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? Specifically, this project examines pragmatic difficulty for this group as they interact in English with U.S. Americans and EL classmates from around the world in U.S. American cultural contexts. Among the Arabic-speaking ELs who I have taught through a local literacy council and in an IEP of a language school at a private university in the American Upper Midwest, I have observed challenges with the pragmatics of English, particularly in regard to verbal and non-verbal expressions and exchanges of politeness. Compliments paid to me by students who are native Arabic speakers from the Middle East tend to be effusive, to the point where an unknowing recipient may view them as insincere or obsequious. To the students from this group who like me as an instructor, I am not just a good teacher, but "the best teacher in all of the state . . ."

Wolfson detailed similar observations in a work he published in 1989. He reported that ESL/EFL students are often taught that an appropriate response to most compliments in English is "thank you." ESL/EFL instructors of native Arabic-speaking students can teach "thank you" as an appropriate compliment response, Wolfson maintained, but they should be aware that "thank you" is not such a simple and easy response strategy for this group of ELs to learn. He further states that "thank you" by

itself (*Shukran* in Arabic), is not usually a sufficient response to a compliment in an Arab cultural context. It needs to be supplemented by additional words. By itself, it may sound flat and awkward, because it appears to signal the end of the conversation. This sort of plain utterance may be difficult for native Arabic speakers, because it seems inadequate to them. It may not appropriately express what the speakers want to convey, as compliments in Arabic tend to be more extended (Wolfson, 1989).

Through my study, I further such observations, combining them with insights from cultural informants to narrow in on recurring problems. I seek to answer the question: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? Ultimately, the goal is to match the findings of my research with effective teaching strategies that will better prepare EFL/ESL instructors and learners on the pragmatics of politeness as expressed in English by native Arabic-speaking ELs. This information will assist in my aim of lessening occasions of pragmatic error and improving the English language usage of these learners.

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents definitions for pragmatics and politeness, definitions for terms related to pragmatics that are relevant to this study, and some of the fundamental research in the pragmatics of politeness. It provides an overview of differences between Arab and Western cultures and Arabic and English languages that could give rise to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Findings that make the case for pragmatics

education also are presented. Finally, the need for research in the area of the pragmatics of politeness and native Arabic-speaking ELs is shown.

The Pragmatics of Politeness

Pragmatics is defined in Chapter One as the study of the ways in which language is used in social context, i.e., the ways people use language in authentic conversations, including how context helps to determine whether a particular utterance is appropriate or inappropriate, and how changes to context alter utterances' meanings (Bergmann, Hall, & Ross, 2009). The other key term in this study, *politeness*, is inextricably tied with the concept of face, originally introduced by Goffman in 1967. It is believed to be derived from common Far Eastern notions of deference, as expressed in the familiar saying, "to lose face" (Mey, 2001, p.11). Brown and Levinson (1987) worked with Goffman's notion of face as a property that all human beings have and that is broadly comparable to self-esteem. They maintain that in many encounters, one's face is put at risk, e.g., asking someone for a sheet of paper, telling someone he has to wait to see the doctor, or complaining about the quality of work or service one has received; all threaten the face of the person to whom they are directed. When one performs such actions, they are typically accompanied with language designed to compensate for the threat of face. This redressive language is politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Therefore, the pragmatics of politeness is the study of the ways people use language in actual conversations to show concern for another's publicly projected image.

Because this study examines politeness as expressed in English by native Arabic-speaking ELs, the focus here is on the second language use of this group, specifically the

interlanguage pragmatics of their use. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) defined interlanguage pragmatics as the study of non-native speakers' acquisition and use of linguistic action patterns in a second language. Interlanguage pragmatics in this study centers on native Arabic-speaking adults' acquisition and use of polite expressions in English in an ESL context.

Discussion of a language learning group's pragmatic abilities, interlanguage or otherwise, is likely to include some reference to pragmatic competence, defined by Thomas (1983) as the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. Thomas further differentiated between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence refers to the use of appropriate language to complete a speech act, while sociopragmatic competence refers to the appropriateness of a speech act in a particular context (Thomas, 1983). This study will include discussion of both pragmatic competencies.

Pragmatic competence can be measured by examining occurrences of pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure takes place when a first language (L1) speaker perceives the purpose of a second language (L2) utterance as something other than what the L2 speaker intended. In other words, if the utterance of an L2 speaker fails to achieve the speaker's goal when it reaches the ears of an L1 listener, pragmatic failure has occurred. Pragmatic error is the action or utterance that causes pragmatic failure. One cause of pragmatic failure is pragmatic transfer, the use of L1 speech strategies that are incorrect in the respective L2 setting. Pragmatic transfer is but one element in the phenomenon of negative transfer, when a language learner references an L1 practice and applies it

inappropriately to an L2 (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Rose, 2000; Thomas, 1983).

Another acquaintance, Mariam, a young woman from Syria, shared an experience of hers that demonstrates pragmatic failure caused by pragmatic transfer: "In the Arabic-speaking world, when someone offers you food or drinks, you are supposed to say 'no' even if you want it, then they are supposed to insist a couple of times, and then you say 'yes.' When I first arrived to the U.S., I was dropped off at my residence, and I was supposed to meet one of my English teachers the next day who would take me around campus. I had no idea how to do anything, and I tried going to a supermarket, but it turned out to be about fifty times bigger than any grocery store I had been to in Syria. I was so overwhelmed and didn't even know how to buy the right food. The next morning, I was starving. When I met my teacher, she took me to the cafeteria and asked me if I wanted to eat anything. And of course, in a very polite Syrian manner, I said 'no,' expecting her to insist over and over, but she, in a very polite American manner, just said 'okay.' I ended up not having anything to eat all morning. I was so sad and hungry."

Two more concepts important to the discussion of the pragmatics of politeness (as expressed by native Arabic-speaking ELs) are related to the cultures of the two languages involved in this study—Arabic and English. The concepts are collectivist and individualist, and they can be applied respectively to Arabic and English (Hofstede, 1991). In collectivist cultures, emphasis is placed on belonging to groups, which generally look after their members in exchange for loyalty. In contrast, people in individualist cultures generally look after themselves and their immediate family only. Emphasis in individualist cultures is on individuals' initiative and achievement.

Collectivism and individualism exist in all cultures, but one pattern tends to dominate in any given culture. Cultures of the Middle East, where Arabic is the predominant language, tend to be collectivist. Cultures that tend to be individualistic include most of those on the European continent and any English-speaking country, especially the United States (Hofstede, 1991).

Discussion of research in the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by native Arabic-speaking English learners includes discussion of pragmatic competence, pragmatic failure, individualism, collectivism, and face. Just as the phenomena of politeness and face studies are inextricably linked, so too are the phenomena of pragmatics and politeness. Results from fundamental research in the pragmatics of politeness demonstrate the strong connection.

Brown and Levinson (1987) accounted for two varieties of face, positive face and negative face, and the social context of politeness is central to their explanation. Positive face is a person's wish to be well thought of. It includes the desire to have what we admire admired by others, the desire to be understood by others, and the desire to be treated as a friend by others. Negative face is one's wish not to be imposed on by others. Working with data gathered from Tamil speakers in southern India, Tzeltal speakers in Mexico, and speakers of American and British English, Brown and Levinson (1987) concluded that politeness phenomena, such as actions and utterances to save positive and negative face, are available in each language. Social harmony, they conclude, is at the core of politeness strategies in each society, and local cultural differences trigger their use.

Cultural differences may account for more than the triggering of politeness phenomena. Other researchers in the field claim that cultural differences may account for misunderstanding of the notions of politeness. Some of this research will be previewed as this study further examines language traditions of native Arabic and native English speakers.

Pragmatic Miscommunication and Misunderstanding

Arabic and English are languages from very different cultures that are increasingly in contact owing to commerce, immigration, education, travel, and conflict. Cultural differences between the two language populations can help to explain why the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding between the two groups is so great. Further examination of individualist and collectivist cultures underscores some of the major differences.

Members of English-speaking, individualist cultures tend to use a communication style in which individuals appear to be open with each other. This openness often involves revealing personal information about oneself when interacting with others. Generally speaking, native English speakers from individualist cultures can be characterized as open and approachable, neither secretive nor reserved. They tend to communicate in ways that are consistent with their feelings, rather than opting to hide them. Words like *certainly*, *absolutely*, and *positively* often punctuate their speech (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2008).

In striking contrast, members of Arabic-speaking, collectivist cultures tend to use indirect, implicit, and ambiguous words when speaking. Members of these cultures often

imply intentions rather than say them directly or explicitly. One is expected to communicate in ways that maintain harmony within the group. Communication in collectivist cultures can be characterized as indirect, ambiguous, and understated, and collectivist culture members are said to be reserved and sensitive to listeners. Words like *maybe*, *perhaps*, and *probably* are often used to avoid sounding assertive or aggressive (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2008).

The differences in communication style between individualist cultures and collectivist cultures are evident upon comparison of the dynamics within the group most vital to both cultures—the family. Communication in individualistic American families tends to be open. Dialog between parents and children is encouraged, even nurtured. Children are taught to be independent thinkers and to question (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2008). In collectivist Saudi families, communication tends to be more one-sided. Parental authority is revered and not to be questioned. The Saudi cultural informant of this study, FMA, reported being 'super annoyed' and 'embarrassed' by his American friends and acquaintances when he witnessed their interactions with their parents. He went so far as to say that he was 'ashamed' for them, as he explained that Saudi children should 'never' argue, disagree, or even question their parents. He added that to do so is beyond impolite, it is considered highly disrespectful and threatening to family unity in Saudi culture. FMA's convictions in this regard are so strong that he reported estranging himself from American friends who he says he witnessed disrespecting their parents. He added that he could only renew those friendships if the parents of those friends called him to tell him that their children had made things right. FMA's American friends were left wondering

why he had disappeared from their lives, and as he summed up these experiences, he concluded that he had lost many American friends this way.

A study by Brown and Levinson (1987) advanced the notion that group harmony and solidarity were at the core of politeness strategies in most societies. However, since its publication, researchers have noted that universals in politeness may not be as common as originally thought. These researchers have concluded that notions of what is polite and appropriate differ widely among language communities (Fraser, 1990). Hinkel (1996) discovered this while conducting a study of L2 pragmalinguistic behavior. His study involved 240 English learners, all of whom had been admitted to a large university in the United States and were pursuing graduate and undergraduate degrees. The students were native speakers of Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Arabic, or Japanese. All of the students were aware of the norms of politeness and appropriateness in both their native languages and in their second language, English. They also recognized specific pragmalinguistic behaviors and sociopragmatic norms accepted in the United States. The ELs often viewed the U.S. American pragmalinguistic behaviors and sociopragmatic norms critically when they compared them with the behaviors and norms of their native languages and cultures. Therefore, Hinkel concluded, the ELs were not always willing to follow polite speech behaviors of American English. Hinkel further concluded that because the ELs viewed their native behaviors as more appropriate, they transferred their rules of appropriateness to a U.S. American setting. Adhering to the pragmalinguistic norms of their second language communities occupied a relatively low priority among the students' goals, and their self-reported behavior in Hinkel's study supports that finding. The author concluded that disparities between cultures are bound to influence how

different language-speaking communities perceive another's behaviors and speech acts, especially in matters of politeness, which are used to maintain social relationships.

A significant body of literature has addressed interlanguage pragmatics and politeness-related behaviors, and an equally significant amount of work has been devoted to studying socio-cultural and pragmatic norms of L2 learners. Many of these researchers have determined that L2 learners demonstrate behaviors different from those of native speakers when performing speech acts characteristic of politeness, such as apologies, requests, compliments, expressions of gratitude, and refusals (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Hinkel, 1996; Olshtain, 1989).

Researchers further conclude that differences in speech act behaviors between native speakers and non-native speakers likely stem from two phenomena—the transfer of pragmatic (or politeness) rules and the developmental nature of second language acquisition. In the case of pragmatic transfer, non-native speakers default to L1 strategies when they do not understand, or are unfamiliar with, the appropriate politeness strategies of the L2. In the case of developing second language skills, non-native speakers respond according to incomplete and evolving ideas of appropriate L2 behavior (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Blum-Kulka, 1983, 1989; Hinkel, 1996). Given sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences between native Arabic-speakers and native English-speakers, coupled with negative pragmatic transfer and evolving target language skills, the potential for pragmatic misunderstanding among native Arabic-speaking ELs is great.

Polite responses in Arabic often contain evocations of god's greatness, blessing, or assistance. That alone is not unusual or problematic. Most languages use some formulaic responses. However, if a ritualistic expression in Arabic like *m'addam* (it is

presented to you) is made via negative transfer to English, the Arabic-speaker's intent will likely be misunderstood by direct, literal, native English-speakers. *M'addam* is not a genuine offer of an object (the usual response in Arabic translates as "it looks much nicer on its owner"), but an American or Englishman might think so, believe that an object is being presented to them, and take it (Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996).

In general, expressions of politeness in Arabic are much longer than corresponding expressions in English (Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996). Compliments contain more words and are likely to continue beyond the original compliment and corresponding response. This interaction between speakers establishes the sincerity of the compliment, for the longer the compliment and its response, the greater the sincerity. The length also relates to the value Arabic speakers place on eloquence (Nydell, 1987). Nydell noted that the ability to speak eloquently is a sign of education and refinement in Arabic, and how one says something is as important as what one has to say. If native Arabic-speaking ELs use more words than native English speakers in an attempt to make compliments and compliment responses sound sincere, pragmatic failure is likely to result from an overindulgence of words. Native English-speakers would likely interpret such elegance as inappropriate or insincere, as exemplified in the account of students who do not simply compliment a favorite educator as a good teacher, but the best teacher in all of a setting that may spread as far as an entire state or region (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996; Nydell, 1987).

Ironically, Thomas (1983) noted that expressions of friendliness in American English, characteristically overt and exaggerated, may contribute to the perceptions of Americans by native Arabic speakers as insincere and superficial. Simply coming

together on a plane of mutual understanding is often difficult for native English speakers and native Arabic speakers, Al-Zumar (2011) concluded in his cross-cultural study of apologies in Arabic and English. Owing to cultural differences, each group assigns different degrees of severity to many of the same situations. Al-Zumar (2011) also concluded that individuals from collectivist Arab cultures are much more willing to admit their mistakes. Admitting one's deficiency in order to set something right is not as embarrassing and discrediting as in English-speaking cultures (Al-Zumor, 2011).

In a case study of two female adult educators, an American and a Saudi, Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2008) examined the breakdown of professional and personal communication and relationship from the perspective of cultural differences. Graduates of the same doctoral program in the United States and good friends, the two women expected that their working styles would be consistent and complementary while working at a private women's college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The reality was very different; the researchers concluded that the ensuing conflicts between the two women were more cultural than personal or linguistic. The cultural norms that each had grown up with had led to different understandings of the world.

At the beginning of their work experience in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi subject (AJ) saw the American subject (Michelle) as a member of her tribe or clan. From the Saudi perspective, when Michelle went to work at the college, she was to defer to AJ and to know her place within the hierarchy and AJ's clan. Michelle was expected to protect AJ's status and position at work at all costs. However, as time went on, Michelle began to make new friends, work on various projects, and travel in different circles. AJ felt that Michelle betrayed her clan as well as her professional position. AJ's collectivist

perspective contrasted, and eventually clashed, with Michelle's individualistic perspective. While AJ recognized the professional organization of the women's college in Jeddah as highly hierarchical, Michelle did not. In higher education in the United States, the faculty and deans have more relaxed relationships. Michelle did not perceive any need to avoid talking directly to her dean or other administrators at her school in Jeddah. When she did, AJ felt terribly betrayed because Michelle should have approached them through AJ (Glowwacki-Dudka et al., 2008).

Norms of politeness factored highly in this case study. In Saudi Arabia, a subordinate is not supposed to be direct when speaking with someone higher up, and communication between hierarchies is very nuanced and indirect. Coming from an individualist American culture, Michelle demonstrated open, transparent communication and viewed the power structures as equally open and fluid. Michelle thought that her Saudi friend acted arrogantly with subordinates. From the Saudi perspective, Michelle's perception of AJ and other administrators acting arrogantly was a misinterpretation of a communication strategy accepted in Saudi culture as an appropriate way to interact with subordinates. AJ thought Michelle had overstepped the boundaries of hierarchy at the Saudi school, and she felt deeply betrayed by Michelle's actions and communications (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2008).

The individualist nature of native English-speaking cultures was contrasted with the collectivist nature of native Arabic-speaking cultures in this section. Both Michelle and AJ responded to their work environment with what they believed was appropriate behavior. Michelle's individualist nature clashed with AJ's collectivist nature and conflict ensued. This example underscores the differences among language groups

(specifically English and Arabic) regarding notions of appropriate behavior and the potential advantage of pragmatic education for language learners advocated in this project. Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of the universal nature of politeness was challenged by reports of studies that proved that there is quite a range of differences in the notion of what is polite behavior among language groups. Differences demonstrated between native speakers and non-native speakers likely stem from the transfer of pragmatic (or politeness) rules and the developmental nature of second language acquisition. The ramifications of these differences in culture and language for native English speakers and native Arabic-speaking ELs were presented in potential areas and in actual examples of miscommunication and misunderstandings between the two groups. The potential for frustrating conflict exists. Clarifying potential areas of cultural and communication differences may assist in minimizing conflict between the two groups, and in opening the door to increased understanding. The study of pragmatics may be the key.

Pragmatics Education

The importance of pragmatic competence has been demonstrated by researchers Thomas (1983) and Wolfson (1981) whose works reveal that while native speakers often forgive the phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors made by L2 learners, they are less likely to forgive pragmatic errors. Native speakers commonly interpret pragmatic errors negatively as arrogance, impatience, or rudeness. The literature reviewed thus far demonstrates that there are many situations where pragmatic incompetence may lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between speakers from two language groups

(Al-Zumor, 2011; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 1996; Thomas, 1983). However, further examination of existing studies on pragmatics reveals that while pragmatic errors are often the cause of an L1 listener being unable to correctly interpret a language learner's utterance, education in pragmatics, even small amounts, can lessen the occasion of pragmatic error on the part of L2 learners (Nelson, Carson, Al-Batal, & El-Bakary, 2002).

Early discussions of pragmatic competence and education centered on the question of a link between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) recounted that in 1993 she advanced the notion that pragmatic competence was not simply a case of learning grammar. She sought to head off the claim "that if learners knew or were taught grammar better they would get pragmatics for free" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, p. 695). As early as 1985, Olshtain and Blum-Kulka provided evidence showing that second language learners failed to achieve native-like competence even at rather advanced stages of language learning. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) made a similar finding in their study of graduate students at an American university. From these and other studies of advanced L2 learners, Bardovi-Harlig (1999) concluded that grammatical competence alone is not a sufficient condition for pragmatic competence. She examined an article by Kaspar and Schmidt (1996), dedicated to the development of pragmatic competence, and then summarized the authors' basic questions about second language acquisition with respect to pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) surmised that native and non-native speech acts could differ in four important ways and suggested that each of the four measures, or any combination of them, could be used to

evaluate pragmatic competence, as opposed to an evaluation of pragmatic knowledge based on a second language learners' knowledge of grammar. The four measures are:

1. Choice of speech acts, i.e., do learners and native speakers choose the same generally acceptable utterances in a given situation?
2. Use of semantic formula, e.g., how does one respond to a compliment? The semantic formulas include: a) expressing gratitude (by saying *thank you*), b) downgrading the compliment (by saying something like *Oh, this old thing*), c) accepting responsibility (*I made it myself*), or d) reciprocating with a return compliment (*You look great, too!*).
3. The content of the propositions encoded, e.g., when turning down an invitation, one can be vague (*I have something else going on*) or specific (*I have to go to my grandmother's birthday party*).
4. Difference in linguistic form, i.e., is the speech act recognized with downgraders (*Could you do me a favor?*) or aggravators (*Just do me a favor*) (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

The preceding measures can also serve as a foundation for lessons in pragmatics education. Studies concerned with cross-cultural discourse have shown that different cultures possess different rules of appropriateness, and the choices included in the aforementioned measures exemplify some potential differences. Al-Zumor (2010) underscored the need for education in pragmatics in his study of apologies in Arabic and English. To make learners truly effective communicators in a second language, he maintained, they need to be aware of the rules of appropriateness of speech acts in the

culture of the target language. He went on to state that the importance of these rules is equal to that of awareness of the rules of grammar in the target language.

Other studies went beyond acclaiming the importance of education in pragmatics—they demonstrated its effectiveness. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) published the results of a longitudinal study of the acquisition of pragmatic competence among advanced adult non-native speakers of English. The learners were taped in advising sessions over the course of a semester, during which they received positive and negative feedback from an advisor regarding the desirability and outcome of particular speech acts. What they found is that non-native speakers improved their pragmatic competence in advising sessions over time. Much of the learning that took place was attributed to the interactional nature of the advisory sessions and the teaching that took place in the sessions themselves.

In a study of American and Arab perceptions of an Arabic turn-taking cue, Ward and Al-Bayyari (2010) discovered that a surprisingly small amount of training was sufficient to prevent misperceptions of utterances. In the words of the authors, "The mechanics of turn-taking may seem harmless and mundane" (2010, p. 274), but the researchers discovered that misperceptions of turn-taking cues can occur, and these misperceptions may lead to greater misunderstandings. English and Arabic differ in the way that speakers coordinate their interactions moment by moment, and this difference may be a source of intercultural misunderstandings.

Back-channel feedback (i.e., short utterances such as *okay*, *right*, and *hmmm*) is one way that people show interest and attention to whomever is speaking. A speaker will indicate when such feedback is welcome with various cues. In Arabic, one such

commonly used cue is a steep, continuous drop in pitch. U. S. Americans, however, commonly misinterpret this cue as expressing negativity. However, after a twenty-five minute, pragmatic training session of responding to drops in pitch from Arabic speakers' cues with back-channels such as *yes*, *right*, and *okay*, the American subjects of the researchers' study showed marked improvement in accurately interpreting this turn-taking cue (Ward & Al-Bayyari, 2010).

In summary, Thomas (1983) and Wolfson (1981) suggested the importance of pragmatic competence in works that show an inclination among native speakers to be forgiving of phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors made by L2 learners, but less likely to be forgiving of the pragmatic errors made by the same groups. Several researchers previously cited on pages 24 and 25 detail situations where pragmatic incompetence led to miscommunication and misunderstanding between native Arabic-speaking and native English-speaking groups. Early discussion of pragmatic competence and education linked the former with grammatical competence, but after closely examining the connection, Bardovi-Harlig (1999) concluded that grammatical competence alone could not account for pragmatic competence. Al-Zumor (2010), Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993), and Ward and Bayyari (2010) all indicated the importance of pragmatic education and noted its effectiveness. Nevertheless, my research has not uncovered a study of the pragmatics of politeness as used by native Arabic-speaking English learners. Nor have I found a study solely dedicated to pragmatics education for this group of ELs, though studies indicate that such education is effective in improving pragmatic competence.

Gap in the Research

Though a significant body of literature has addressed interlanguage pragmatics, politeness-related behaviors, and the sociocultural and pragmatic norms of second language learners, most of these studies have been conducted in the context of Western languages and Western cultures. Regarding their research on compliment behavior, Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) noted that an examination of the literature shows that the great majority of previous work has focused on U.S. American and European phenomena (2001, p. 1486). Few have been conducted on the Arabic language or on native Arabic-speaking subjects. Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) further noted in their study of Jordanian college students' responses to compliments that studies based on non-Western languages are scarce, and they claimed that conclusions drawn from studies of Western languages and Western subjects are less generalizable than the literature would lead one to believe. On the same subject, Nelson et al. (1996) noted that few, if any, cross-cultural studies had investigated compliment responses in an Arabic-speaking country. Nelson et al (2002) observed a slight change, stating that although the number of studies on speech acts in Arabic had grown a bit, the quantity was still relatively small. As I researched pragmatics and politeness in regards to native Arabic-speaking English language learners of any nationality, I found that the reality described by the aforementioned researchers had not changed much. The literature addressing pragmatics in Arabic is in short supply, never mind pragmatics and native Arabic-speaking English learners.

Though references have been made to the Arab world, Arab culture, and the Arabic language, the studies cited in this review have been rather specific. Equally specific is the focus of my study—pragmatics and politeness as expressed by adult, native

Arabic-speaking English learners in ESL environments. No study has examined the pragmatics of politeness in English by these ELs in this depth before. No studies specifically address the areas of pragmatic difficulty for this population of learners as they strive to appropriately express themselves in matters of politeness in English. This study is intended to uncover information that will help improve the English language usage of these students, particularly to help them avoid the occasions of pragmatic error. It is also designed to assist English language instructors by giving them teaching strategies to use with this population of students.

While a few of the researchers cited in this review investigated certain speech acts relevant to politeness, e.g., refusals and responses to compliments, none of them approached their subjects with a more open agenda that would allow the subjects' conversations, questions, responses, requests, and various other speech acts to determine the focus of the study. The areas of difficulty will present themselves in the course of my study. In conclusion, although considerable research has been conducted regarding pragmatics in the context of Western cultures, languages, and subjects, little work has been done on the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by native Arabic-speaking English learners. This project addresses that niche.

Research Question

My aim is to match effective teaching strategies to the areas of pragmatic difficulty uncovered by this project for native Arabic-speaking English learners at a language school located on a Midwestern American university campus. The goal is to improve their pragmatic competence and, by extension, their use of the English language.

Specifically, the goal is to help them avoid occasions of pragmatic error when expressing politeness in English. To that end, this is the question I seek to answer: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings?

Summary

In this chapter, I summarized literature relevant to the pragmatics of politeness and native Arabic-speaking ELs. Complicating the language differences between Arabic and English are the cultural differences between the populations of predominantly Arabic-speaking countries and the native English-speaking world. As a vital part of any study involving these two languages, collectivist cultures and individualist cultures were also summarized. This comparison proved to be particularly relevant in the examination of pragmatics involving native Arabic-speaking ELs. Areas of potential difficulty were reviewed, as well as the potential benefits of education in pragmatics for this group of ELs. Finally, the chapter reveals that existing studies regarding pragmatics and native Arabic-speaking ELs are few and focus on specific sectors of this population. In conclusion, the case is made that these students require a study of their own to uncover which areas of pragmatic difficulty need attention in their education in the pragmatics of politeness as expressed in English.

The next chapter presents a curriculum design and educational methods that address the areas of pragmatic difficulty uncovered in the research for native Arabic-speaking ELs.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

This project was created to answer the question: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? In Chapter Two, observations, first hand accounts by cultural informants, and a review of literature addressing the issue uncovered some of the areas of difficulty commonly experienced by this group of ELs. This chapter focuses on a curriculum that matches the findings of my research with effective teaching strategies for EFL and ESL instructors. The aim is to better prepare adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs on the pragmatics of politeness as expressed in English, i.e., to raise the pragmatic awareness of this group of ELs on matters of politeness as expressed in English.

Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the framework used to design the curriculum—backward design. The three stages of the backward design process are explained, as well as the rationale for using this framework when developing a curriculum. The paradigm that informed the primary choice of teaching method employed in the curriculum, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), is presented, as well as the key principles of CLT. A rationale for choosing this method is given. Next, the intended audience is

identified and the setting is explained in detail. Finally, a description of the project is made.

Curriculum Design

The curriculum is planned via backward design as advocated by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) in their text *Understanding by Design*. The authors described backward design as a three step process which can be summed up in three questions, each describing the steps in the order presented. Step 1 is to identify results, calling for lesson planners to think of long-term goals, questions that promote inquiry, knowledge, and skills, and to think of the content standards trying to be met. The question one should be asking about students in compliance with Step 1 is this: "What should they [the students] walk out the door able to understand, regardless of what activities or texts we use (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.17)?" Step 2 asks planners to determine what evidence would acceptably prove that students have achieved desired results, i.e., what is acceptable evidence of student understanding and proficiency? Planners should wonder if the target learning has been achieved, rather than if a certain content has been covered and ask, "What is the evidence of such ability (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.17)?" Step 3 advocates for planning learning experiences and instruction accordingly. "What texts, activities, and methods will best enable [the desired results] (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.17)?" In short, backward design may be thought of as purposeful task analysis, i.e., "Given a worthy task to be accomplished, how do we best get everyone equipped (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.19)?"

Just as pragmatics involves a variety of communicative functions, settings, and skills, the background design of *Understanding by Design* advocated by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) is not a prescriptive program, rather it is a design that has understanding as its goal with priorities that center on big ideas and important performance tasks of the chosen topic. As such, it is very adaptable to a curriculum designed for the teaching of pragmatics. It does not require a belief in a single pedagogical system or approach, rather it offers a framework and some guidance to educational design that focuses on student understanding. It presents a robust approach to planning rooted in the belief that a variety of instructional approaches deepens student learning. With instructional variety and student understanding at its core, backward design is a good fit for pragmatics education. Teaching pragmatics requires a variety of teaching strategies and has student awareness of less concrete features of language at its core (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Teaching Method

Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) maintained that there is not a single best way to teach pragmatics. The view of these experts informs the framework for my varied approach to the lessons in the curriculum. These experts do, however, advocate that activities in pragmatics lessons should include two important pedagogical features: 1) authentic language samples from authentic scenarios should be used as models in lessons, and 2) clear examples of pragmatic features should be presented to ELs before they are asked to make interpretations and produce their own examples (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003).

The main goal of a varied approach to instruction of pragmatics is to raise the pragmatic awareness of the ELs and to give them choices when interacting in the target language (English). The goal is not to have the ELs prescribe to a standard response when using language in various contexts, but rather to help them become familiar with a range of possibilities and practices in the target language (English). Exposing learners to pragmatics in a second language helps them to expand their view of that language and their view of those who speak it (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). The method described in the next paragraph facilitates an expanded view of English for the targeted group of ELs in this project.

The prominent method of instruction employed in the pragmatic lessons is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Parrish, 2004). CLT is a departure from grammar-based lessons and rote learning. It places an emphasis on communicative competence as the goal of instruction. Pragmatic fluency requires neither expertise in grammar nor the ability to memorize language tables. Rather, pragmatics requires the ability to communicate in a variety of functions such as greetings and making invitations, compliments and requests. The setting of these attempts at communication can be as varied as restaurants, family living rooms, and school. CLT emphasizes communicative competence in all of these functions and settings. As such, it is a natural fit as an approach to teaching pragmatics lessons. The key principles of Communicative Language Teaching are the following:

- The goal of instruction is learning to communicate effectively and appropriately.
- Instruction is contextualized and meaning based.
- Authentic materials are incorporated from the start.

- Repetition and drilling are used minimally.
- Learner interaction is maximized; the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning.
- Fluency is emphasized over accuracy.
- Errors are viewed as evidence of learning (Parrish, 2004).

A pioneer in the field of adult education, Malcom S. Knowles, identified six main characteristics of adult learners. Still influential in shaping adult education in the twenty-first century, these characteristics helped inform the lessons of this project as well.

- Adult learning is self-directed.
- Adult learning utilizes prior knowledge and life experiences.
- Adult learning is goal-oriented.
- Adult learning is relevancy-oriented.
- Adult learning highlights practicality.
- Adult learning encourages collaboration (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (July, 2003), experts in the field of pragmatics, do not prescribe to one, formulaic approach to teaching pragmatics. Their open embrace of a variety of teaching methods is in accordance with CLT, which has an approach to teaching language in a variety of ways (and in a variety of scenarios) at its core (Parrish, 2004). The two specific pedagogical features that they do advocate can be found within the key principles of CLT. First, their call for authentic language samples from authentic scenarios to be used as models in lessons is in accordance with CLT's key principle of authentic materials being incorporated from the start. The second pedagogical requirement for lessons in pragmatics--pragmatic features should be presented to ELs before they are asked to make interpretations and produce their own examples--is in

accordance with the CLT principle that instruction be contextualized and meaning based. Parrish (2004) states, “Although teachers throughout the world describe their approach to teaching as CLT, you could walk into classes that look different in terms of activities, materials, and interactions” (p.31). Given the wide range of communication functions and settings inherent in any instruction of pragmatics, CLT is a most fitting method by which to plan lessons.

The Audience and the Setting

Students and instructors alike can benefit from this curriculum unit. The student bodies it is intended to teach are adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners studying English either as a foreign language or a second language. Instructors tasked with teaching English to this group of ELs can use this unit to guide and inform instruction of a pragmatics seminar intended for them.

My interest in this specific group stems from my current position as an English instructor of an intensive English program (IEP) at a small university in the Upper Midwest of the United States. Students at the language school where I teach come from all over the world. Significant portions of these students are native Arabic speakers from countries in the Middle East. Over the course of three years teaching at this school, I have instructed hundreds of adult, native Arabic speakers from these countries, mostly from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Though designed with this group of English learners in mind, those studying at a language school on the campus of a small university in the United States, this curriculum

unit could work in any classroom of adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners. It could work equally well on community college campuses, at liberal arts colleges, and at universities large and small. It could also work in any adult community education classroom filled with this target group of ELs.

Though designed with an ESL setting in mind, the curriculum could be used in EFL settings as well, such as college and university campuses across the Middle East. It would be particularly useful for those ELs planning a visit, an extended stay, or a study abroad program in the United States. EFL and ESL instructors at any of these settings who wish to teach lessons in pragmatics to this target group of ELs can benefit from this curriculum unit.

Project Design

This project is a curriculum design for a two-to-three-day seminar on "The Pragmatics of Politeness." It is designed for adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners, and it can be taught in an EFL or an ESL setting. The curriculum includes five lesson plans, one to three hours in length per lesson. The curriculum is flexibly designed so that the instructor conducting the seminar can decide the length and volume of instruction, from one to three days, two to five lessons, and one to three hours per lesson. For example, one instructor may wish to conduct a one-day seminar that offers two lessons, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, each lasting two to three hours. Another instructor may wish to make use of all five lessons spread out over two to

three days. Another may wish to facilitate all five lessons in one day with each lesson being allotted less time, about an hour to an hour and a half per lesson.

In accordance with backward design advocated by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), the curriculum begins by noting the big ideas and important performance tasks of the topic. "A big idea is a concept, theme, or issue that gives meaning and connection to discrete facts and skills" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.5). The purpose of the seminar is to raise the pragmatic awareness of the targeted EL group—adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners—and provide them with choices when interacting in English. This is the big idea that propels this curriculum unit.

Equally significant is that students *understand* the stated purpose. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) offer this definition for understanding: " . . . to make connections and bind together our knowledge into something that makes sense of things. To understand is to be able to wisely and effectively use—transfer—what we know, in context, to apply knowledge and skill effectively, in realistic tasks and settings. To have understood means that we show evidence of being able to transfer what we know (p.7)." The curriculum is designed so that students understand:

- The pragmatics of complimenting in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures.
- The pragmatics of requests in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures.
- The pragmatics of politeness in communication between the sexes in English-speaking cultures and Arabic-speaking cultures.

- The pragmatics of inter-familial communication in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures.
- Using euphemisms to express politeness in English.

Each of these topics will be the basis of a lesson plan in the curriculum. In keeping with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing will be addressed as needed, but given the nature of pragmatics and the topics of the lessons, the focus will be on listening and speaking. Also in keeping with CLT, authentic material and situations will be utilized in each lesson. Learner interaction will be maximized via demonstration and role playing.

Summary

The chapter opened with the central question of this capstone project: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? A brief overview of the chapter was laid out. Backward design was presented as the framework within which the curriculum would be designed, and the three stages of that design model were explained. Next, the primary method of instruction, Communication Language Teaching, was described and a list of its key principles was provided. The rationales for choosing backward design to shape the curriculum and CLT to inform the lessons were also given. After that the audience and the setting targeted for the curriculum unit were detailed. Finally, a description of the plans for a one to two-day seminar on the pragmatics of politeness for native Arabic-

speaking ELs was given with a list of lesson topics for which lesson plans would be provided.

In Chapter Four, I reflect on my experience writing this capstone project. I highlight the knowledge acquired through this process, and what resources I found most useful and/or influential. I also discuss the implications of the research that I did on this project, both for the field of EFL/ESL pragmatics instruction and for me personally as an ESL (and potential EFL) instructor. Ideas for further studies and curriculum projects that could enrich the study of the pragmatics for ELs are offered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to answer the question: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? Specifically, this project examines pragmatic difficulty for this group as they interact in English with U. S. Americans and EL classmates from around the world in U. S. American cultural contexts.

Chapter Overview

This chapter will first present major learnings of the project, i.e., what I learned through this capstone process as a researcher and as an educator of adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs. Next, links to the literature that I read in the course of writing this project will be explored. The most important pieces of the literature review will be described, and the reasons why those pieces proved so useful to this project explained. In addition, broader implications of the project (how does the project inform decision makers) are explored. Limitations on the project will be revealed, as well as speculation on future, similar, or related research projects that this study may inspire. Finally, sharing this project with others will be discussed, as well as how the work is beneficial to my profession and others in adult ESL education.

Major Learnings

The areas of pragmatic difficulty that I found most prevalent among adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners through this study are the ones detailed in the first four lessons of my project, a seminar on the pragmatics of politeness as expressed by adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners. Those lessons are: The pragmatics of complimenting in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures, the pragmatics of requests in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures, the pragmatics of politeness in communication between the sexes in English-speaking cultures and Arabic-speaking cultures, and the pragmatics of inter-familial communication in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures.

In addition to the areas that are explored in depth via the pragmatics lessons designed in my project, other learnings proved equally important to this project. Foremost among those is that the Arabic-speaking world is not monolithic. One may suggest that this is common sense knowledge, yet it is worth stating as the opposite is a common assumption made by many. Those who are more enlightened are likely to cite the number of nationalities encompassed in the general category of Arabic-speaking—Saudi, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, Jordanian, etc. Even among the more enlightened, who can cite various nationalities within the Arabic-speaking world, few take into consideration the range of cultures within those nationalities alone. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, one can speak of the majority Sunni Saudis versus the minority Shiite Saudis. On each side of this divide are the degrees of conservative, moderate, and progressive individuals. Inevitably, there will be some participants in the seminar who will point out these facts. Those

conducting this seminar should proactively acknowledge that the conclusions drawn from the lessons in this project are general in nature.

Another significant learning that surfaced during research on this project was the collectivist and individualist dichotomy. While my Saudi students tend to socialize together in the school where I teach, I did not sense that they were obviously or markedly more collectivist than the other students. Students from Asian and Latin American countries bonded inside and outside of their language groups as readily and as easily as those from Arabic-speaking countries. Stories and incidents of betrayal, disloyalty, estrangement, and division were as common (if not more prevalent) among my Saudi students as they were among other groups. While I read and learned about the differences between English-speaking and Arabic-speaking cultures, most notably the tendency of native English speakers to be more individualist than the more collectivist, native Arabic speakers, my first-hand experience working with many Saudi students did not support what I had read. I was more impressed with what I viewed on a regular basis—the universality of human nature and the human condition. Attitudes and opinions of individuals varied as greatly with the Saudi students as with any other nationality, and I did not perceive a greater will to maintain harmony among my Saudi students than among any other nationality at the school, or in comparison with the American culture that I know so well.

Reverence for one's family is indeed strong in both cultures, but just as Glowacki-Dudka, et al. (2008) maintained, communication between parents and their children is not as open in native, Arabic-speaking cultures. Whereas American children openly challenge and question their parents, the degree with which this is done in Arab cultures

is not nearly the same. I was surprised to learn from accounts given by my students in the course of my research just how true this is.

Hinkel (1996) concluded, after his study of pragmalinguistic behavior, that English learners from Asian countries often perceived the pragmalinguistic behavior and sociopragmatic norms of their American peers critically in comparison with their own. Yet, among the adult English learners I have encountered in the course of my teaching career, I have not observed that great a difference between the behavior of Asian students in the classroom and that of their American counterparts.

Literature Revisited

The case study of two female educators, an American and a Saudi, by Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2008) was the most informative (and by extension) the most influential of the studies cited in my language review. It demonstrated that no matter how well-educated the participants are, no matter how well one thinks one knows another language and culture, no matter how close the friendship between members of two separate language groups and cultures, and no matter how well-intentioned one is, the possibility of pragmalinguistic misunderstanding and failure is ever-present, and it may occur.

I do not view my project, my seminar of lessons in pragmatics, as a panacea for miscommunication between native Arabic speakers and native English speakers. As I stated in Chapter One, my project can help to lessen the occasion of pragmatic error and failure. The necessity of this measured claim was underscored by my research and the process of creating my associated project. With each step of each lesson I detailed, I

realized the innate imperfection of any measurement of human nature, or more specifically, the limits of what my lessons can accomplish. My expectations regarding results, as well as any claims of success in advancing pragmalinguistic understanding, will remain measured. This learning was underscored by the case study detailed in the literature of Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2008).

In the piece by Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2008), the norms of politeness factored highly. As noted in Chapter Two, a subordinate in Saudi Arabia is not supposed to be direct when speaking with someone higher up. Communication between hierarchies is indirect and contains a lot of nuance. Coming from an individualist culture, the American woman in the study demonstrated open, transparent communication and viewed the power structure as equally open and fluid. The American woman thought her Saudi friend acted arrogantly with Saudi subordinates. From the perspective of the Saudi woman in the study, the American's perception of administration at the university as arrogant was a misinterpretation of a communication strategy accepted in Saudi culture as an appropriate way to interact with subordinates. The Saudi thought that the American woman had overstepped her hierarchical boundaries at the Saudi school and felt betrayed by her dear friend and colleague from the United States.

This case study is a classic case of the individualistic nature of a native English-speaking culture clashing with the collectivist nature of a native Arabic-speaking culture. Both individuals in the study responded to their work environment with what they believed was appropriate behavior. The American woman's individualist nature clashed with the Saudi woman's collectivist nature and conflict ensued. The example underscores the ever-present potential for, and the volatile nature of, pragmatic failure. While I do not

expect my seminar to eradicate conflict owing to pragmatic failure between the two language groups in question, I am heartened by the studies that prove that lessons in pragmatics education can lessen the occasion of these errors and temper the fallout once they have occurred. Therefore, the work of Nelson, Carter, Al-Batal, & El-Bakery (2002) was very encouraging. It convinced me that my project was worthwhile, for they concluded that even small amounts of education in pragmatics could lessen the occasion of pragmatic error on the part of L2 learners. This group of researchers were preceded by Bardovi-Harlig (1999) who countered the claim that pragmatics was merely a premium of studying grammar. These educators made the case for me that my pragmatics seminar would be both necessary and effective. The work of Ward and Al-Bayyan (2010) got even closer to the heart of the matter. In a study of American and Arab perceptions of a speech act, they discovered that a surprisingly small amount of training was sufficient to prevent misconceptions of utterances. Though small, my seminar on the pragmatics of politeness aimed at adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners would have an audience and it would be effective.

Broader Implications

This capstone project proves via the research cited that lessons in pragmatics could be beneficial to native Arabic-speaking, post-secondary students pursuing degrees as English learners at colleges and universities in the United States. The English language education of any adult, native Arabic-speaking EL would not be complete without lessons in pragmatics. Therefore, any adult, native Arabic-speaking EL planning to live,

study, or work in the United States in a setting among native English speakers where English is the primary language would benefit from this seminar.

Those who plan the English language education of native, Arabic-speaking ELs should include pragmatics education in their curriculum. This matter could be addressed by education administrators of the various nationalities in the Middle East. It could be mandated by academic directors of English language schools across the English-speaking world. Barring a broader administrative mandate, individual ESL or EFL instructors could incorporate the lessons from this seminar into their curriculums. Spare hours in the course of grammar, listening, or speaking instruction could be filled throughout a term with the pragmatics lessons from this project, conveniently designed for sixty minutes (or more, depending on the availability of time) per lesson.

Limitations

The availability of time may be a significant limitation to the successful implementation of this project. Each lesson is designed for a minimum of one hour, but sixty minutes may prove insufficient, depending on the number of participants in the lesson, the cooperation of the students, and the productivity of each group of individuals. More time per lesson would allow for variables in each of the three factors cited. Ideally, two hours (or more) per lesson would allow for a deeper exploration (and understanding) of the language and cultural norms presented.

Future Capstone/Research Projects

An excellent companion project or thesis for this capstone project would be a report on the results of the practical application of the lessons in my seminar. Given the time and opportunity, a report by any instructor who had conducted the lessons several times with several different groups would be most enlightening. Follow-up studies could examine and explore many different academic avenues, beginning with the workability of these lessons, individually or as part of a multi-lesson seminar. The efficacy of the lessons would make another interesting study. The study could report on what worked well and what did not work as well in the application of the plans. Recommendations could be made for changes to improve the implementation of the lessons. Another study could explore and report on the results of the instruction from the lessons on the students. Each of the five lessons could launch a study of its own: Following the pragmatics lesson on complimenting in English for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs, how had these speech acts by the target study group changed? What was the nature of the changes, and how soon after instruction were changes noticed or recorded? How had a greater understanding of the differences in interfamilial communication between native Arabic speakers and native English speakers affected the communications and relations of the participants? What misunderstandings were avoided as a result of the learnings for Lesson Three on the differences in standard responses to commonly asked questions? How had Lesson Four of the pragmatics of politeness in communication between the sexes in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures affected the speech acts of adult, native Arabic ELs in ESL settings? And what affect did knowledge of commonly used euphemisms in American English from Lesson Five have on

understanding English for the adult, native Arabic-speaking participants? The search for answers to these questions, similar questions, or related questions could be the inspiration for future research projects.

Communicating Results

Once news of the completion of this capstone project spreads via email and social media to my friends, university classmates, and colleagues, I will share my lesson plans with anyone who requests them. Given the population of native, Arabic-speaking students at institutions of higher learning in the five-state Upper Midwest region (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota) and the number of university classmates of mine who have spread throughout the region, the reach of this seminar is potentially far. Naturally, the reach will not be limited to the Upper Midwest. Rather, it is the region from where the spread of this project will launch. Among the dozens of students from Saudi Arabia at my school (located at a private, four year college in the Upper Midwest), references are constantly made to family members at several colleges and universities in the region. Once my students have participated in the seminar, word will spread among their network of family and friends at colleges and universities in the immediate area and beyond.

I can proactively promote the sharing of these lessons via direct offers to conduct the project seminar to the ESL and student services offices of the many institutions of higher learning in the area with a population of native, Arabic-speaking students. The bid could suggest either a student-centered seminar, a professional development workshop

for the staff, or a combination of both. In addition, employers in the area with a significant employee population of Arabic-speaking ELs would likely be interested in information regarding the lessons in my seminar. The capstone project abstract, an outline of the seminar, or a summary of the pragmatics lessons that I designed can be sent via email or postal service to the human resources departments of potential employer participants. To reach more educators of adult English learners, proposals to present my pragmatics seminar at state, regional, and national gatherings of professionals in ESL education can be formally submitted.

Benefits to Educators of Adult English Learners

To paraphrase a finding by researcher Bardovi-Harlig (1999), lessons in pragmatics are not obtained for free, i.e. the study of the grammar of a language is not enough to inform second language learners of the many nuances involved in using a language in various contexts. Pragmatics education, even small amounts, helps language learners interpret the meaning of a native speaker's utterances more accurately (Nelson et al., 2002). This capstone project fills a gap in pragmatics education for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs as evidenced in the research of Chapter Two. It gives educators of adult ELs from this language group the lesson plans they need to fill this gap in their students' education.

The benefit to adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs is so great as to be immeasurable, for researchers Thomas (1983) and Wolfson (1981) revealed that while native speakers often forgive the phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors made by L2

learners, they are less likely to forgive pragmatic errors. Because native speakers commonly interpret pragmatic errors negatively as arrogance, impatience, or rudeness, this capstone project has the potential to prevent many instances of misunderstanding resulting from pragmatic error between adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs and native English speakers. The consequences of pragmatic failure evidenced in the examples provided in this capstone project will lessen: Compliments may be received graciously and not with suspicion of one's intention; individuals may be less likely to be estranged from their friends over inter-familial feuds; requests may be less likely to lead to hurt feelings, interactions between the sexes may be less awkward, and English euphemisms will likely be less misunderstood by those who have engaged in the pragmatics lessons of this project.

Summary

The chapter opened with the central question of the capstone project: What are the areas of pragmatic difficulty for adult, native Arabic-speaking ELs when expressing politeness in English in ESL settings? A brief overview of the chapter was provided. The four areas of pragmatic difficulty most prevalent among adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners were cited—the pragmatics of complimenting in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures, the pragmatics of requests in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-speaking cultures, the pragmatics of politeness in communication between the sexes in English-speaking cultures and Arabic-speaking cultures, and the pragmatics of inter-familial communication in English-speaking cultures versus Arabic-

speaking cultures. In the course of exploring these areas of pragmatic difficulty for the target language group of ELs in this study, additional learnings surfaced—the Arabic-speaking world is not a monolith, and participants of the seminar designed for this capstone project will make this clear to those conducting the seminar. Other premiums, the collectivist and individualist dichotomy of the Arabic-speaking and the English-speaking worlds proved not to be as pronounced as the literature reviewed had led the researcher to believe, while the degree of reverence children in Arabic-speaking families display for their parents was underscored.

The case study of two female educators, an American and a Saudi, by Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2008) proved to be the most influential of the studies cited in the literature review. It demonstrated that no matter how well one prepares to learn a second language and the culture of its native speakers, the possibility of pragmalinguistic misunderstanding and failure is ever present and may occur. Those occasions can be lessened with even a little pragmatics education, as evidenced in the work of Nelson, et al. (2002). Any adult, native Arabic-speaking EL planning to live, study, or work in the United States would benefit from this project. Time may be a significant limitation to the successful implementation of this project, as it is best conducted in two-hour sessions per lesson. Efforts to save time may be at the expense of the quality of learning. A number of future, similar, or related research projects could be inspired by this project, and those are detailed in the chapter, as well as plans to share the lessons with other educators of adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners.

Personal Reflection

When I began this study, I wanted to explore a topic that would be relevant to a population of English learners with whom I was hoping to work in significant numbers. My plan was to teach abroad at an institution of higher learning somewhere in the Middle East. The opportunity to teach English to adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners came sooner than I expected when I began teaching for an intensive English program for adult English learners at a private university in the Upper Midwest. The experience I gained working with students from this language group helped to focus my study and create my project. I look forward to the practical application of my research and planning. I consider my seminar to be a work in progress. Once practical applications begin, I will continue to fine tune the lessons I have written—proven successful elements will remain in tact, others tweaked to improve the efficacy of the seminar, and I am open to the possibility that some aspects of my project may need to be discarded. Any changes will be made with the intent of better serving the student populations on whom it is focused—adult, native Arabic-speaking English learners—and the educators conducting the seminar. Whether in its present form or future permutations of the original plans, I am certain that the target language group of English learners and their educators will benefit from this capstone project's application.

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